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PACIFISM: SOME PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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A pacifist speaking to philosophers faces a temptation that is almost impossible to resist—namely to try to defend pacifism philosophically. Yet I think such a temptation must be resisted, for to try to provide a philosophical foundation for pacifism would be a philosophical mistake. It is the same kind of mistake that those make who try to show that God must have created the universe if he is to be God—i.e. to make a metaphysical necessity out of what must remain contingent relation. I do not wish to be misunderstood, however, as such a claim might be interpreted to suggest that pacifism is a position without relational appeal, being based on theological convictions that cannot stand the light of critical scrutiny. I certainly do not believe that. Rather I am trying to make the simpler point that pacifism, at least the kind of Christian non-resistance to which I am committed, is at the beginning and end a theological position. As such it raises philosophical issues which cannot be avoided, but in and of itself, its integrity is theological.

Given the interest of this group it would be inappropriate for me to try to develop to any great extent my understanding of Christian pacifism. However I must at least try to say enough to substantiate as well as exemplify how it draws on fundamental theological convictions for its intelligibility. The reason I believe Christians have been given the permission, that is, why it is good news for us, to live without resort to violence is that by doing so we live as God lives. Therefore pacifism is not first of all a prohibition, but an affirmation that God wills to rule his creation not through violence and coercion but by love. Moreover he has called us to be part of his rule by calling us into a community that is governed by peace.

Therefore pacifism is not simply one implication among others for Christians. Pacifism is not just another way that some Christians think they should live. Rather pacifism is the form of life that is inherent in the shape of Christian convictions about God and his relation to us. Though it counts individual passages of scripture such as Matthew 5:38-48 important, pacifism does not derive its sole justification from them. Rather pacifism follows from our understanding of God which we believe has been most decisively revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. Just as God refused to use violence to insure the success of his cause, so must we. Therefore Christian pacifism is not based on any claims about the

proximate or ultimate success of non-violent strategies, though we certainly do not try to fail as if failure in and of itself is an indication of the truthfulness of our position. Faithfulness, however, rather than effectiveness, is the ultimate test of Christian pacifism.

Even though for the purposes of this presentation I am willing to be designated a pacifist, I am extremely unhappy with such a description of my position. For to say one is a pacifist gives the impression that pacifism is a position that is intelligible apart from the theological convictions that form it. But that is exactly what I wish to deny. Christians are non-violent not because certain implications may follow from their beliefs, but because the very shape of their beliefs form them to be non-violent. Moreover when the designation, pacifism, is used to describe Christian non-resistance the impression is given that Christians in the face of violence are primarily passive in the face of evil. Yet that is at odds with Jesus' active engagement with the powers. The pacifist is no less obligated to resist injustice, for not to resist means we abandon our brother or sister to their injustice. Pacifists, however, contend the crucial question is *how* we are to resist.

There are obviously many objections that such a position must meet, but I think that for those that are philosophically trained one challenge is particularly interesting—namely, pacifism seems contradictory since in the name of non-violence Christians must abandon their responsibility to care for and protect their neighbor. Christians, it is alleged, are obligated to love those in need and Christian pacifism cannot help but acquiesce in the face of injustice and violence. Therefore we must at times take up the means of violence to prevent greater injustice. This objection is often extremely appealing to philosophers, as it seems to put the issue in conceptual terms that allows for, if not demand, further nuance. The issue is not faithfulness to the figure of Jesus, but how love is to be understood and how its implications are to be displayed when we seem caught between contending values; or why justice is more basic than love, and so on.

However this way of putting the "problem" is a refusal to accept the radical implications of the kind of love Jesus demanded of those who would be part of God's kingdom. For the "problem" presupposes that we should only love the one being attacked unjustly; such an account is far too restrictive. The attacker, who may well be unjust, is no less an object of God's love than the one being attacked. The pacifist, no less than those who support violence in the name of the defense of the innocent, cannot abandon those who are being attacked. But the pacifist refuses to accept any account of what such "help" would look like if it requires us to witness to the one being attacked that they are any less obligated to love the enemy than we. To be sure, we are required to love the attacked, but we are equally obligated to love the attacker. That we are so may surely mean that certain situations may end tragically, but I do not see how those who support the use of violence provide any less tragic "solution."

There is one issue worth highlighting in this respect, as it is often missed by many who assume some form of just-war logic for the legitimation of violence. For it is too often assumed that the logic of the just war position is determined on analogy with self-defense rather than defense of the innocent. But the two are not the same, though admittedly a defense of self can possibly be justified as a defense of the innocent. Yet if just war is defended on analogy of defense of the innocent, then at the very least it would seem that those who use just war to justify resort to violence must not be so quick to assume the legitimacy of a violent response simply because their side is attacked. Or perhaps more accurately put, they need to be much more critical of the assumption that they have a "side."

Much more needs to be said about such matters, but I hope I have said enough to indicate that those that defend just war need to be much more candid about how the basic analogies underwriting just war logic works. They need to show us, for example, how one moves from individual analogies, whether they be of self-defense or defense of the innocent, to underwriting war as a valid response by Christians. Or they need to illumine why just war is better understood as a form of state craft rather than a general theory of the justifiable use of violence. Only when such matters are clarified can we better understand which criteria are to determine whether a war is justifiable and the priority relations between the criteria.

By raising these kind of issues I am not trying to defend pacifism by showing the incoherence of just war theories. I am simply trying to illumine how many of the challenges brought against pacifism work equally in relation to just war thinking. At this point, however, I think it best not to try to defend pacifism but rather to indicate some of the philosophical issues I think pacifism entails. In other words I want to try to indicate how pacifism may engender some philosophically fruitful problems and perspectives.

For example I think it is interesting that the kind of pacifism I defend does not neatly fit into the current philosophical options for understanding normative ethics. That is, it is neither consequential or deontological even though it may well involve aspects of both. For the emphasis is not on decision or even a set of decisions and their justification. Rather this kind of pacifism forces us to consider the kind of persons we ought to be so that certain kinds of decisions are simply excluded from our lives. Thus pacifism is not so much a strategy for how we should deal with violence as it is a way of life that forces us to live free from violence as an option. The pacifist is someone committed to never facing the question of whether to use or not use violence as a means of securing some good.

Of course that is easier said than done. Nor am I suggesting that such a task is ever over. Indeed I suspect few of us ever "decide" to be a pacifist. It is even not clear to me how anyone could make such a decision since we could hardly

know what kind of decision we had made since one no more becomes a pacifist all at once than one becomes a Christian all at once. Rather pacifism is a willingness to accept the slow training necessary to rid the self of the presumption that violence is necessary for living life well.

From this perspective the problem with the just war rationale for violence is that it so seldom places a limit on the use of violence. The just warrior assumes that violence can only be used as a last resort, but the very meaning of "last resort" becomes elastic exactly because it is assumed that if things become rough we can resort to the gun we keep handy for just such emergencies. As a result we fail to become the kind of people whose very commitment to non-violence makes it possible for us to live non-violently.

Put in the language of philosophical ethics I am suggesting that pacifism is much closer to an ethics of virtue than to those positions that tend to limit ethics to questions concerning the justification of decisions. For the pacifist does not accept descriptions of situations as constant. Questions of what we are to do are determined by what we are or should be. Virtues of courage, temperance, justice, humility, patience are no less necessary for the pacifist than anyone else. However these virtues assume a different intentionality and priority for those who would be pacifist. For example the pacifist, I suspect, has a much greater stake in the significance of learning to be patient than those who would defend justifiable use of violence. Just to the extent we are patient, moreover, we are forced to redescribe our world—e.g. we must entertain the possibility that our enemy is also one of God's creatures.

I am not suggesting that pacifism and an ethic of virtue rise or fall together, but rather that pacifism forces us to think much harder about an ethic of virtue than has been characteristic of recent philosophy. Indeed I would put the matter more strongly and say philosophers' general assumption or acceptance of violence as legitimate has been one of the reasons they have paid such scant attention to questions of virtue and character. An emphasis on the significance of the virtues does not conceptually require a pacifist position, but such an emphasis might at least make one more receptive to some accounts of pacifism.

The kind of pacifism I am willing to defend, I think, also challenges some of the prevailing assumptions about moral rationality as it has been depicted by contemporary philosophers. For here we have a position that is clearly derived from particularistic convictions; yet I would argue they apply to anyone. The "universality" of these convictions however, is not in their form but in their substance. All people ought to be nonviolent not because of some general truth about humanity, but because all people have been called to be part of the kingdom initiated by Jesus of Nazareth.

This kind of claim cannot help but make philosophers nervous. For it seems that, in order to convince others of the plausibility of this position, we must ask

them to accept particularistic religious convictions. In such a situation the possibility of argument seems next to impossible and, even worse, moral relativism is threatened. I can say little to assuage fear of such results, but I can at least suggest that the kind of position I hold about pacifism is not without resources to respond to this set of concerns. Yet these resources require the philosopher to accept concepts and language in matters dealing with rationality that they usually wish to avoid.

For example, it means that the philosopher might have to take sin seriously, not simply as a general statement about the human condition, but as a serious claim about our moral and rational capacity. For it is the pacifist claim that our unwillingness to live nonviolently is but an indication of our unwillingness to live in a way appropriate to our being creatures of a good creator. To live rightly, to say nothing of reasoning rightly, requires a transformation of our lives. We can only begin to appreciate the truth of nonviolence when we begin to live nonviolently.

Put differently, the kind of claims Christians make for nonviolence require living representatives if they are to be convincing. The rational power of nonviolence as a morality for anyone depends on the existence of examples, that is, people who have learned to live nonviolently. Such a claim is not peculiar to pacifism, however, but rather denotes how any substantive account of the moral life must work in a world determined by sin. Indeed pacifism in such a world is the very form of moral rationality since it is a pledge that we can come to common agreement on the basis of discussion rather than violence. What the nonviolent witness denies is that such agreement is possible by argument abstracted from the kind of people who have learned that even their enemy may be speaking the truth. We cannot exhaust moral rationality with a formal account of reason in and of itself, though such accounts promise to teach us much, but rather we must attend to the actual process of people who learn to be present to one another without fear. Put simply, what has been missing from most accounts of moral rationality is a consideration of why courage is integral to those that would want to know the truth.

The particularistic convictions that sustain nonviolence, therefore, do not pretend that others already share the same set of convictions that make nonviolence rational. Indeed the fact that we know the world is divided into hostile camps is exactly the reason we believe that nonviolence is true. I do not mean to imply that nonviolence is a strategy for resolution of differences, though I certainly do not think it is without strategic importance. Rather I am suggesting that nonviolence has a strong claim to being true exactly because it helps us understand the nature of our existence without accepting the limits of our world as final. Nonviolence is a pledge, a promise based on the work of Christ, that moral rationality is not just an ideal but a possibility in a world shaped by the sinful illusion that

we are people who love the truth.

There is one final set of philosophical issues raised by pacifism that I think must be considered—namely, questions of political obligation. It is often alledged that anyone who holds the kind of absolutist position I do must be an anarchist. Yet I refuse to accept such a characterization, for it seems to assume that the state, in essence, is violent. I do not deny that the rise of the modern state has often been described and/or justified by the claim that the state is that body that claims hegemony over violence in an identifiable geographic area. Yet I see no compelling philosophical reason why that account of the state must be accepted.

Indeed I simply refuse as a pacifist to think I need any account of the state at all. In other words I do not think that one needs a theory of legitimacy in order to determine how one will or will not relate to one's social order or governmental authority. Rather I simply take societies and the state as I find them. As a pacifist I will cooperate in all those activities of the state that contribute to the common good. Put simply, I do not see any in principle reason why I cannot be a good citizen, but much depends on how a particular social order determines what being a citizen entails. If citizenship means that we can only serve others through societal functions if we are willing to kill, then indeed the pacifist cannot be a citizen. But at least that tells us much, for such a state, whether it be democratic or not, must surely deserve to be described as the beast.

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